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ABSTRACT

This Digest examines the reasons why--outside of retirement--school principals leave their jobs. It also lists strategies districts can employ to retain principals. Many principals exit their profession because of the long hours, the workload and complexity of the job, the unending supervision of evening activities, the minimal pay difference between top teachers and administrators, and increasingly complex social problems. To ease the burden on principals, some school districts employ job sharing in which tasks are divided among two or more leaders who possess skills in different areas. One district in Tennessee, for example, initiated a plan whereby one principal begins with the freshman class and then follows the students through all 4 years of high school. To ease principals' frustration over the time they spend on administrative tasks, some districts have started training programs to certify business managers, freeing principals to focus more on instruction and curriculum. Other districts have tried to retain principals by providing more professional development and by offering more opportunities to network. When asked, most principals voice a desire for more training, a need that school boards can address by educating the community about the challenges principals face. (Contains 10 references.) (RJM)

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Retaining Principals

By Elizabeth Hertling

The shortage of applicants for the position of principal is receiving a lot of media coverage. Stories feature schools opening with temporary principals at the start of the school year and tell of vacancies due to retirement.

A study of elementary and middle-school principals conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals in 1998 found that the 42 percent turnover that has existed during the last ten years is likely to continue into the next decade (Doud and Keller 1998). The shortage of applicants for principalships makes retaining current principals even more critical.

This Digest examines some reasons—other than retirement—that school principals leave their jobs, and offers strategies districts can employ to retain them.

Why Do Principals Leave Their Jobs?

Today's principal is faced with the complex task of creating a schoolwide vision, being an instructional leader, planning for effective professional development, guiding teachers, handling discipline, attending events, coordinating buses, and all the other minute details that come with supervising a school (Richard 2000).

"In short, the... principal must be a hero!" say Diane Yerkes and Curtis Guaglianone (1998). They point to many factors that make the principalship highly stressful:

- long hours--for most, a 60- to 80-hour work week
- workload and complexity of job
- supervision of evening activities "unending"
- minimal pay difference between top teacher and administrator
- feeling overwhelmed with very high expectations
- state and district mandates that require "mountains" of paperwork
- increasingly complex society and social problems

The increasing demands of the position can cause many principals to feel the stress is not worth it.

"It used to be that you could get by being a good manager. Now principals must do everything from ensuring that immigrant students learn English to bringing all kids up to high standards, and so much more," said Carole Kennedy, principal in residence at the U.S. Department of Education (Ashford 2000).

Erosion of authority to effect change, escalating expectations of accountability, lack of support, and a stressful political environment for school leaders are other factors that cause principals either to consider leaving the field entirely or to request classroom teaching assignments (Adams 1999).

Are Two Heads Better Than One?

To ease the burden on overworked principals, some school districts are now turning to job sharing. Dividing tasks between two leaders who possess skills in different areas—such as supervising instruction and managing discipline—lets schools benefit from more well-rounded leadership. Job sharing also makes it possible for someone who is interested in pursuing a career in administration to fill a part-time internship-type position.

How does job sharing work? It depends on the needs of the school. Muffs and Schmitz (1999) describe one school's solution: The "veteran" principal works the "first shift," and the intern principal covers the afternoon hours. Because the job requires constant communication, the two principals' shifts overlap at least one hour a day so they can work together. Or, one observes a class while the other addresses other school concerns. Although both principals attend some school-related evening events, they alternate for other afterschool activities so that both principals have more time to spend with their families.

Farragut High School in Knoxville, Tennessee, also has experimented with job sharing—except the job of principal is not shared by two people, but by a team of six (Ashford). There is one principal for each grade level and that person moves along with his or her class. For example, this year's tenth-grade principal will be the eleventh-grade principal next year. After the four-year rotation is complete, he or she starts over again with a new class of ninth-graders.

In addition, Farragut also has a chief principal whose role is to work closely with teachers as an instructional leader. He serves as the final authority and oversees community relations, staff development, custodial maintenance, and other administrative functions, as well as teacher evaluations. A curriculum principal is in charge of curriculum matters, including textbooks and a master schedule for the whole school, and spends time in the classroom working with students.

How Can the Traditional Principal's Role Be Reinvented?

Many principals complain that they are forced to spend too much time handling administrative tasks such as setting bus schedules and overseeing custodians, and too little time on instructional leadership. "Some weeks I spend more time arranging to have the garbage picked up by the township than observing classes," said one principal (Ashford).

In England and Wales, some schools have already addressed that problem by splitting administrative duties such as budgeting and building management away from instruction. School heads work in tandem with business managers, called bursars (Richard).

In January 2001, the Houston, Texas, school district inaugurated a training program to certify business managers, who are expected to ease the

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burden on principals. The business managers are responsible for administrative functions such as the school budget process, purchasing, payroll, facility management, data management, transportation coordination, management of noninstructional personnel, and compliance with state, district, and federal regulations. The district suggests that principals might opt to use money in their budget to hire one of these business managers in lieu of an assistant principal (Ashford).

What Other Methods Exist To Retain Principals?

Hiring additional people to distribute the principal's workload is prohibitively expensive for some districts. NAESP's study found that unless enrollment at a school exceeds 600 students, it is unlikely that an assistant principal position will be created (Doud and Keller).

One way to keep principals at their jobs is to provide an increased level of professional development. The Educational Research Service (ERS) found that principals repeatedly expressed a desire to augment their expertise and personal skills, but found the current professional-development activities at their schools lacking (2000). In a study of 105 California superintendents, more than 65 percent listed poor interpersonal skills as a reason principals may fail at their jobs (Davis 1997). The second-highest reason was poor decision-making. Both of these failings could be addressed—and avoided—through professional development.

ERS reported that one of the most frequently requested opportunities for development was the chance to network with other principals to exchange ideas, evaluate the demands of their jobs, and discuss how to implement change at their schools. Principals also placed a high value on followup training and training on how to translate ideas about change into practice.

Districts can learn from the Chicago Public Schools, which has developed some of the most comprehensive programs for professional development of principals. Training is available for aspiring principals, first-year principals, and experienced administrators, and is geared toward addressing the specific needs of each group. Techniques used in the training include case study, simulation, reflective analysis, and coaching (Peterson and Kelley 2001).

Casey and Donaldson (2001) cite the case of California's Pajoaro Valley Unified School District as a prime example of comprehensive professional development. The program sets a common vision for principals through its Professional Standards for Administrators, which establishes clear goals for principals. Their Administrative Cycle of Inquiry includes self-assessment, personal and site goal-setting, professional development, and evaluation. This offers the principal the opportunity to self-reflect and to meet with his or her supervisor and also with a peer/mentor partner.

The program is tailored to meet the needs of the district. Pajoaro Valley's zone assistant superintendents gather information from principals regarding their professional-development interests. The district's Professional Communities Team then takes this information and provides the kinds of training and growth opportunities the principals perceive they need.

What Can School Boards Do To Help?

"The superintendent and the board of trustees must be committed to a new vision of quality, accountability and sensitivity to... administrators," suggest Yerkes and Guaglianone.

Although the principal is responsible for establishing the climate and culture of the school, Yerkes and Guaglianone say the principal is not the sole source of the positive attributes of a healthy school. Students, teachers, staff, parents, and the community all are partners in creating a dynamic school. The authors suggest school boards should educate the community about the changing role of the principal to garner increased support for principals and perhaps lessen the demands on those occupying this role.

Yerkes and Guaglianone also advise boards to take the following steps:

- Offer financial support for sabbaticals to give burnt-out principals a reprieve.
- Create a family-friendly environment to accommodate principals' personal lives.
- Review the salary schedule and find a way to reward principals.
- Determine flexible attendance requirements and expectations at school functions.
- Redesign the organizational structure of the job.

Doud and Keller also suggest that boards devise financial incentives to keep retirement-eligible principals from leaving.

The principal's job is complex and demanding-and so is the task of administrators faced with retaining them. There is no magic solution, no easy answer. However, thoughtful examination of the nature of the principal's role will better equip school districts to retain principals.

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